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C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 002238

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DEPT PASS TO USAID FOR LAC/CAM KATYA SIENKIEWICZ

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KCRM](#) [SNAR](#) [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KJUS](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: VIGILANTE GROUPS FILL PUBLIC SECURITY VOID IN
SANTIAGO ATITLAN

REF: GUATEMALA 1764

Classified By: Ambassador James M. Derham for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Vigilante groups reportedly operate in the Santiago Atitlan area, targeting criminals and those suspected of engaging in witchcraft. According to UN representatives, these vigilante groups are not unique to Santiago, but operate in many areas of the country in response to ineffective law enforcement. While some view these groups as essential to combating crime and impunity, others consider them dangerous and detrimental to society, undermining the rule of law. Vigilantism is a complex issue that the new Colom administration, elected by a rural constituency, will have to address. End summary.

¶2. (C) Embassy Human Rights Officers traveled to Lake Atitlan October 16-17 to investigate reports of "social cleansing" by local vigilante groups. Representatives of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH), and civil society discussed the rise of vigilantism in the Santiago Atitlan area. They claimed that clandestine groups of armed individuals freely operate in the area, targeting local criminals, prostitutes, adulterers, and other "socially undesirable" elements. They identified four vigilante groups made up of former soldiers, guerrillas, and others.

¶3. (U) Vigilante groups reportedly have been operating in the area since the late 1990s, protecting local communities and coffee and avocado harvests from bandits. In 2003, the groups began to expand their range of targets to include other "socially undesirable elements," including "witches."

¶4. (C) There is divergence of opinion among the populace as to the legitimacy and efficacy of these vigilante groups. Many argue that they serve a necessary societal role in the absence of a functioning justice system. According to a U.S.-born Catholic priest who has resided in the area for 40 years, the community sees no alternative to these "social cleansing" groups given the endemic corruption in Guatemalan institutions. Like many area residents, the religious leader refrained from condemning or condoning the extrajudicial killings.

¶5. (SBU) Others, however, contend that the groups are dangerous and detrimental to society, undermining the rule of law and intimidating the population to an extent that many are afraid to speak in public. They assert that while only criminals were targeted by the original vigilante group, the more recent groups have also been targeting community development leaders and indigenous spiritual leaders who engage in "witchcraft." Some of the groups have reportedly evolved into "protection" rackets, extorting money from local residents.

¶6. (C) Civil society leader Francisco Coche, who recently fled Santiago after being threatened by a vigilante group for allegedly stealing funds from a post-Hurricane Stan project he was coordinating, feared that the groups represent a return to the armed conflict of the past. Coche viewed the threats as "an aggression against Guatemala's indigenous identity," and urged the elected government of Santiago to find a solution to the problem.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Killings by vigilante groups are in part a societal response to weak rule of law. State efforts to combat crime have been inadequate, and vigilante groups have emerged to fill the void, but in some cases have reportedly targeted innocent persons to settle personal or business disputes. These groups are not unique to Santiago. According to UNHCHR, vigilante groups operate in many areas of the country. State security forces have thus far shown an inability to crack down on these vigilante groups. Growing insecurity in the countryside will be a challenge that the Colom administration, elected by a rural constituency, will have to tackle early in its term.
Derham